Alone in a Crowd

Schroedel, Jean Reith

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Amy Kelley's traditional Japanese relatives believe she has strayed too far from her proper role, but her husband happily leaves the house repairs in her capable hands.

My parents were divorced when I was nine. My father was a cook at a twenty-four-hour cafe. My mother used to work two jobs—a pressman at a drycleaner's and also as a janitress. After the divorce, my mother moved in with my aunt, who is a widow. My aunt was a journeyman printer—negative stripper—and she was very independent, so I learned a lot of that from her. She's also one of the first women in her field, which subconsciously I wonder if that's what got me into this, but somehow I really don't think so. My aunt was more influential in my life than my mom. Although my mom was around, she was always working.

When we moved to Ballard I was in the fourth grade, and I made some friends out there, but found them to be more closed-minded than neighborly. I didn't really care for the types of kids that were out there, which is why I continued to commute to the Central District to go to school. I felt more comfortable there than I did out in Ballard. Being a minority made it kind of awkward. The school I went to was more or less for low-income students, so we didn't have a lot of classes, and it wasn't coed, so we didn't have classes like shop. There was home ec and sewing, basic women-type classes. From the time I was a freshman in high school I worked to put myself through. Right after school I
I had to go straight to work, so I was never able to take extracurricular activities like volleyball.

I started out when I was fourteen years old working for a knitting company based in Ballard. They made ski sweaters. I started out as just a packer. I'd pack the sweaters in plastic bags and get them ready to ship. Then after a while I got really interested in learning to run the knitting machines. There were no women running the knitting machines. I wasn't supposed to run the knitting machines because I was under age. Because of the child labor laws I had to be sixteen. But I would be able to sneak over and learn when I didn't have much else to do. The boss didn't care as long as I wasn't actually running them. I was just learning how. The knitting was minimum wage. I don't know what minimum wage was in nineteen sixty-nine. It was like a dollar twenty-five. It got slack and I got laid off, so I got a job working in a drive-in restaurant. I started that in nineteen seventy-one—waitress, whatever you want to call it. When I turned eighteen I was making a dollar sixty-five an hour. That was minimum wage, so it had to be a lot less when I was working at the sweater company. It was not so great, that's for sure. The conditions at the knitting mill were not that great. I didn't like the fact that the people who owned the place took advantage of immigrants. They'd pay them the minimum wage and work them like they had no feelings. Just produce the work and no money. I didn't like that. But the drive-in job, I enjoyed that. I really liked working with the public. It was fun, and I had a neat boss who was an older guy. He was really good; there are not many places like that. But the pay was lousy.

I started thinking about non-traditional work seriously when I was a senior in high school, because I realized there'd be something I'd have to do when I got out. I had just met my husband. When he came back from Vietnam he eventually found employment as a machine operator at a big machine shop in Seattle. At first, during all this time I had known him, we
discussed what he was doing at work. I found it fascinating. It was not necessarily machine-type work that I was thinking about. It was more like something automotive.

When I finally thought about machine shop work, I liked the money, and I always wanted to do something different. And then, of course, I like working with my hands. But I thought that maybe I might not be smart enough—whether my education was enough or did I know enough to do it. That was probably my biggest fear, because I think the education I was given in high school was inferior. If I had it to do all over again, I probably would pick a superior high school, but when you're in high school you're not thinking about your education, per se, you're thinking more about getting the heck out of there.

My husband (at that time he was my boy friend) suggested I take some training courses, so he looked around. He had been going to a private fellow who had a private course he was giving in his house, teaching people how to read precision instruments and blueprints. Well, I'd only taken the precision part of it, learning how to use the instruments and stuff. My husband was working in the aircraft industry, and by then they were looking for women and minorities with non-traditional skills. The federal contracts wanted to see more minorities and women in the non-traditional jobs, so they were essentially out looking. They were asking people in the shop if they knew women that would qualify for that kind of thing, so I kind of fell right into place. It helps to know somebody on the inside out there.

When I was hired, I was hired as a milling-machine trainee, which is a twenty-two-month program. I didn't know what to expect, because I had never set foot in a machine shop before in my entire life. I didn't know what it would be like to work with a bunch of men. I felt like I was very naive when I went in there. I had just come out of an all-girl high school and I didn't know a four-letter word from a five-letter word.

It was a big, huge place. They don't have anything small.
Everything's a zillion times bigger than you are. When I walked in there I thought, "Here I am, I'm walking in, I'm eighteen years old." As it turned out I was probably the youngest person in the whole shop. And all these guys that I saw! I thought, "Gee, these guys don't look very friendly at all." And I'm trying to get enough courage to say, "I'll do all right." The first room was awesome. It was closely packed with machines and noisy. It was the largest machine shop in the company—the machine fabrication shop. The head count at that time was over twelve hundred people on all three shifts. It averages three hundred to four hundred people per shift in the entire building and everybody has plenty of space to breathe. They're not real crowded or cramped. They could easily get two or three airplanes in a building that size. It's like a giant warehouse. And the amount of men compared with the amount of women was—really—I didn't think there were so many men in one place. At the time I was the youngest female in there. Now it's changed, but when I walked in there in nineteen seventy-two all the women were either dispatch clerks or tool room clerks, and all in their upper forties and had been there a long time. There wasn't any woman in the non-traditional jobs, so when I went on the machine it was like I was there all by myself.

When I went in I was wondering what it would be like to work with guys. I was wondering whether the guys would like me, whether I could work with them. I knew at least one person there and that was my husband, so I didn't feel like I'd be totally lost, but the others—they were all white, all male, and probably starting at age thirty-five and up.

After the first or second day there was a supervisor that kind of took me under his wing. He was Japanese and he always reminded me of the way I'd like to have my father be. He made me do and think on my own, but it was like he was looking out for me, which I really appreciated.

After eight months of learning the milling machine, I was
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approached by the apprenticeship supervisor and asked if I'd be interested in the apprenticeship program. It sounded fascinating, because I was getting bored with what I was doing, so I filled in the application and had to go before the review board, which was made up of three representatives of management, generally from upper management, and three members from the union. They jointly vote on who's going to be an apprentice; they evaluate apprenticeship applications; they make sure apprentices who are on the program are doing their job, not getting bad grades, not having any problems with supervision, and getting proper training. They have to run the apprenticeship program essentially to the state guideline—what types of courses, what kind of machines you're supposed to run. When you apply for an apprenticeship, you send in an application along with your high school transcript and anything that's favorable, and they evaluate it and then ask for an interview.

My entire interview was tape recorded, and I understand I was the only one tape recorded. The main concern was whether I was going to get married and get pregnant, and I got so tired of hearing it. And then also why I really wanted to become an apprentice, did I really feel I was going to stick it out. Was I going to be there the whole four years or was I going to get pregnant? I would have liked to answer it one way, but I just said, no, I wasn't going to, but I wish I'd told them that nobody has to get married to get pregnant any more. I must have been asked that question four times in my interview. I passed—five people voted for me and one person did not.

I got spoiled in my apprenticeship. Everybody was so willing to teach me everything. Like I was saying earlier, women at that time were such a novelty all the guys were hands on, they wanted to train a woman. I think it was a macho thing for them—"Hey, we got a woman here." The only thing I found was some areas in which I worked I think they were afraid to let me go on the machine, because they were afraid of the fact that they
didn’t really know whether I could handle it or not, so I feel like sometimes I suffered in that respect.

I started out making three dollars and fifteen cents an hour, something like that, and I don’t even know what it is now—twelve forty-three? Right now I’m working on a sixty-two-inch lathe. A lathe is a machine that turns metal, makes it look round on the corners. It doesn’t square ’em up. It doesn’t make it look square or boxy. It makes it look round like the spindles on a bed, if you can imagine them being metal. The machine I’ve got can take over a five-foot-in-diameter piece of work. It works on a single cutting tool.

We do anything from the front end to the back end of the plane. The skin of the airplane and the outside shell and the wings are done by a subcontractor, but basically all the smaller parts, the intricate pieces, are generally done by us. I’ve learned everything from the leading edge of the airplane, which is the part under the flaps that filters up and down. . . . We have aluminum, which is a lightweight metal, and steel, which is what the engines are made of, or the older engines, I should say. We have exotic metals like magnesium, which is flammable and dangerous, and titanium, which is similar to stainless steel, like your pots and pans.

Right now, because of the lathe I’m on, I do only large work. I run all the large jobs on the machine. It’s not really hard. It’s kind of funny to see a woman on this machine. You think, “Oh, she’s gotta work hard.” But it’s not really that bad. I do work hard just to get it set up so I can actually get the job going. But you have cranes to work with. You do have to use brute strength, and I’m not afraid to ask somebody else for help if there’s something I feel is beyond my capability.

I’m quite union active. I’m a shop steward now. I was elected two months ago as a shop steward in the machine shop. I am the first and only woman to be a steward in a machine shop, and I had to work hard at getting that. It’s been real political, as far as
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just getting to have the election so I could become shop steward. The union’s political for two important reasons. One is whether you support the incumbent that’s in office right now, and two, the political incentive. Most men just aren’t ready to take on a woman on a committee that’s going to speak for them all. They feel uncomfortable with the fact that a woman has any self-confidence at all. They feel like it’s a threat. Basically, they start near the bottom and head towards the top—down the road, like a business rep or staff assistant. They’ve got some really weird jobs in the union. I don’t even understand why they even have those positions. I may not agree with what the elected officials are doing, but I believe in the causes and principles of the union. I believe that every person has a right to fair pay and decent working conditions and somebody to represent them in case of problems. I think the approaches of the union have got to change from what they used to be, like way back in the old days, in how you succeed in getting the things you want. But basically the union is only as strong as its membership, and I’m a firm believer that the union should involve its members more, so it can become strong, not alienate themselves from it.

In relationship to women in non-traditional trades, I don’t think the union’s done all that much. They just look at it as something they don’t talk too much about. If you’re a woman and you’ve got any vocal tendencies to speak your mind, you might as well forget anything for yourself, unless you support their ticket. It’s not really a fair game at all, so to speak, within the union. The union, as far as representing women or minorities, is just starting to come out and seeing that justice is done. Basically they don’t like to work on problems with women or minorities because it upsets the rest of the membership—the white Caucasian males. They [the rank and file] think that women and minorities are getting preferential treatment, so they [the union officials] keep it all low-key and quiet.

I treat people with respect if they give me respect. And I don’t
appreciate supervisors, just because they have a little badge that says "supervisor," to treat me just like another employee, another number that doesn't have any feelings. I feel like there's no reason why he can't say, "Please," or "Thank you," or "I appreciate your work." I'm not hesitant to say that. I've had supervisors say, "I need this job done," and I'll say, "What about please?" Or some boss will ask me, "Where the hell were ya?" And I'll ask, "Who the hell wants to know?" I've been wanting to advance in the hourly positions, but I can't seem to, mainly because I'm too outspoken. They want people who are gonna say yes, not why or no, or how come. And I think being a woman doesn't help either. Also, Japanese women are supposed to be diminutive and quiet and do what they're told. I shock a lot of my co-workers.

When I first came into the shop I was a naive girl and I was afraid. I went in one day and opened a cabinet door and there was a nude centerfold. It set me back, but then I realized at the same time that women shouldn't expect to change attitudes of the men. I think, with time, we are showing men we know how to do the work. Then they'll change just naturally. They can't help but respect you if they find out that you can do the work. I think it's very important for women to become more involved with their union and use it to make men realize that they have feelings; they have special problems that men don't understand, like sexual harassment, sexual discrimination. And most of these guys, unless they see it happen to their wives, are oblivious to the whole thing, so they have to be educated, and it has to start with the union, because the management's sure not going to do it.

I have had cases of sexual harassment. I have complained to the EEO commission. The company has an EEO office. I had one supervisor that used to come up behind me and pat me on the butt, and I didn't even know he was back there. And I had another supervisor that would come around, when I didn't
know it, and snap my bra strap! It was just something that they thought was cute. I told the supervisor who used to come up and pat me, “Hey, maybe you’d better cut that out, because if your supervisor saw you do that, you’d be in a heck of a lot of trouble and I’m not real keen on that.” Sexual harassment is one touchy subject. This other supervisor—it wouldn’t have done any good to talk to him. I filed a report and it hasn’t happened since. They had a meeting and told us that they were getting some complaints, not from who, and it’s gotten a lot better. I haven’t had to worry about it from the fellow employees. It’s the managers. I get a lot of teasing, a lot of jokes from the fellow employees; that doesn’t bother me, and I think they have a little more respect for you because they’re working with you. The supervisors, they’re so away and detached from you. They feel like, “Gee, I’m a supervisor, so she should be flattered.”

My husband understands my position. If you say too much then you can end up—you know, as much as they say they’re not supposed to retaliate, there’s other ways they can retaliate. They can make your work a little difficult for you, or they can give you jobs that they know you can’t handle, or assign you to a different machine that’s a little tricky.

I feel like I’ve been sexually discriminated against. I guess that’s all I can say. Nobody’s gonna come out and say, “You’re being discriminated against because of your sex.” I think that there have been jobs in which I have been sexually discriminated against—mainly the jobs that pay in the higher grades. About two years ago I was able to work a lot of the different jobs that pay higher than I get now. No problems. I was always asked to come back. They would always come and get me for a higher-paying job if they needed someone, if someone was sick or absent. And I’d keep going, keep going, keep going in, and the only time there was a permanent opening I didn’t get it. There’s no selection process. It’s a popularity deal. If the boss likes you, he gets you in the job. They’d put guys in the positions that had
less time than I did, who had less experience and less qualifications. And if that's not sexual discrimination, I don't know what to call it. Because they've put me in the positions temporarily before, they're telling me that I'm qualified. All of a sudden the jobs open up permanent, and I'm not qualified. That doesn't make sense to me.

In the area I'm working in I'm the most senior employee on second shift. I feel I am respected because I do know quite a bit more, as far as the procedures and where everybody in the area works, which jobs should be lathed on what machines. It makes me real mad when the lead man is not there they will not give me the lead position. I think it's because I'm vocal. I'm not a yes person. If you're not a yes person, you don't get the position. Although it doesn't help that I'm a woman, because there isn't a single woman in our shop that makes higher than a grade 8, which is what I am.

I went to the company's EEO office on a sexual discrimination claim when I thought I was being discriminated against in not getting the higher-paying jobs. The guy that got the job had less time than I had, and he didn't even have to go through the connecting jobs like me. I was not really satisfied with the results. They told me I didn't have enough running-time experience, which I disagree with, but I felt like there wasn't a whole lot I could do internally and I wasn't quite ready yet to go on the outside. I think I could have been successful going to the outside, but at the same time I didn't want to cut my own throat. If I had gone to the outside and started a sex-discrimination case and won, then the supervisors may retaliate by giving me hard jobs or putting me in an area that was wrong. I'm not the kind of person who likes to make a whole heck of a lot of trouble. These supervisors know that I want to get ahead. I think they also know that I could go to the outside if I wanted to. That's why I'm sort of biding my time. They're gonna realize that I'm gonna run out of patience.
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I filed a sex-discrimination case with the EEO several years ago. I had been trying and trying to get on the apprenticeship board. EEO said there had never been a case like that before. They said there wasn’t anything they could do because it wasn’t a paying job. So I was up a creek. But I wanted it real bad, and a group of apprentices wrote up a petition. The men sent it down to the union hall and the next thing I became an alternate to the committee. Of course, they say it’s not because of the petition, but funny it didn’t happen until the petition had been sent in.

Race hasn’t been too much of a factor. I think most people realize I’m more American than I am Japanese. Race has only been a problem on the men’s bathroom walls. There’s stuff about me on the bathroom walls, but, you know, it’s kind of touching. Somebody will make a comment about me. Amy is a so-and-so, and somebody will put underneath the graffiti, “What difference does it make, she’s nice.” And it makes you feel good to think that somebody thinks that the clown who put this up there was crazy. But it’s no different than blacks or Chicanos or anybody. There’s racism in that shop just like everywhere else. I just live with it. When I first heard about it on the bathroom walls, what am I gonna do, tell ‘em to erase it? It can still go back up there again, you know. I believe there are ignorant people out there, and I’ll just ignore those ignorant people; I can’t waste my time with them.

I like doing things around the house. I like to build things—small carpentry things. I built a sixteen-foot work bench in the garage. I’ve put light fixtures in our house. I’ve found that my job has made it a little easier to understand all these other things I do at home. My husband doesn’t like doing things like that at home. So it’s kind of like, if I don’t do it, it won’t get done. Our marriage is very different. My husband has always been in favor of me becoming better, becoming more independently capable, taking care of myself.

My family doesn’t quite understand what I do. It’s just a
language barrier. I feel it's almost like they have learned to respect me making almost thirteen bucks an hour. And they also realize I'm a lot more American than they probably want. Most of the women in our family have been taught to be traditional Japanese. They're from Japan, where the wife obeys the husband. When he says to get something to eat, you hop to it and do it right away. Where I'm more likely to tell him, "There's the kitchen; if you want something to eat, you can get it yourself." I'm more independent than they'd like to see a Japanese woman be.

But sometimes I miss being able to look like a woman. There's a purpose behind the way I dress. I don't dress to work at a fashion show, but I mean it isn't glamorous and there are times I'd like to dress up. That would be the one thing about work that I don't like. It's hard to relate to other women about what I do. I get tired of getting stared at in department stores when I go in with my grubby jeans and my flannel shirt and my steel-toed shoes. They kind of look at you like, "What in the world?" It's a whole different attitude.

As soon as I walk in the door at work it's like I'm not any sex at all. It's no sex at all. It doesn't matter if I'm a man or a woman. I'm a machinist. I can do the work. The guys look at me, not because I'm a woman, but because I'm a machinist. And that feels real good.

I think this is a good job for a woman, but only if she's strong, and I don't mean just physically. I mean mentally. They need to be strong, secure, emotionally stable, and able to take some stress. There's more pressure than on other jobs I've done. You have to make a good part. Because if you don't make a good part, that's gonna make an unsafe plane. She has to be able to cope with the stress of wanting to do good. Somebody that's physically capable—who knows how to compensate for their weakness. The women I've noticed, and myself too, they find little ways of doing things a little different, because you can't do it the
same way the guys do. They didn't build a woman's hip the way they did unless it was on purpose. I use my hip to a lot of advantage. I don't have the strength all on my own, so I'll put my weight into it also.

Some women just don't have the brute strength to do it, but I think the biggest disadvantage is from the moment they're born. Somebody's gonna raise them to be a "woman"—not to get their hands dirty, not to go out with Daddy and his hammer and nails. She's not gonna develop the mental skill or the agility. I know I have that problem with hand-eye coordination. On my job it hasn't been a problem, but it has been playing baseball. I think if I had been taught when I was a little girl that it was okay for little girls to play baseball, I would have developed that hand-eye coordination. There are other things that men take for granted. Boys, when they're growing up, learn how to fix their cars, learn what a feeler gauge is or how to set spark plugs, how to understand mechanical levers. Women don't have that advantage, no matter how much training they get. They aren't brought up with it, so I think it's important that they realize that and try to compensate. Also I think it's important they realize not to raise their little girl to do the same thing.